

Appreciating English Literature

Part Four

Metaphysical Poetry

Metaphysical poetry was a 17th century literary movement whose beginnings are to be found in Shakespeare's time and continue into the period of the English Civil War in the late 1640s. We can summarise the poems by saying they embody intellectual complexity, philosophical inquiry and the use of bold, unconventional figurative language, particularly metaphor. Rather than relying on traditional, ornate imagery, these poets combine reason with profound emotion in search of greater understanding both of this world and the hereafter.

The name was applied much later by Dr. Samuel Johnson in the 18th century and was not complimentary. He disliked what he considered the knowing parade of intelligence and intellectual aspirations. The poetry itself fell out of fashion for many years until championed in the 20th century by people such as T.S. Eliot.

Characteristics

Conceits

A conceit is an extended and often perverse metaphor that, if nothing else, is highly unusual. For example, John Donne refers to the two arms of a mathematical compass as representing a pair of separated lovers.

Wit & Cleverness

Word play, paradoxes and intellectual brilliance often make the poems hard to understand for a modern readership. It's still well worth making the effort to decipher them.

Philosophical Enquiry

What it is to be human is a common feature and in an age of intense religious debate that tipped over into war, the nature and existence of God is a frequent source of invention.

Major Figures

We haven't time or space to briefly mention three metaphysical poets. They are:

John Donne

Andrew Marvell

George Herbert

Donne is by far the best known and read today. His poems often crop up as set texts in English literature examinations. What is interesting is that he's a poet of almost two halves: the first, a sensual and lustful man, the second (after becoming Dean of St Paul's Cathedral) is a person who is both deeply religious and contemplative.

Marvell we'll see through the example of one poem. Herbert is known for his intricate structure and word play, while the themes of his poems often reflect deep religious longing.

The Flea – John Donne

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
Thou knowest that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead.
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered, swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.
Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we are met
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that self murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.
Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?

Wherein could this flea guilty be
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and sayest that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now.
'Tis true, then learn how false fears be;
Just so much honour, when thou yieldst to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

To His Coy Mistress – Andrew Marvell

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust;
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Milton

We can't leave the 17th century without at least a brief mention of John Milton. Many would argue that he stands shoulder to shoulder with Shakespeare, although he's chiefly remembered for his poetry, not drama.

Milton is sometimes referred to as a metaphysical poet, but that he most definitely is not. There are no conceits, wordplay and demonstrations of intellectual prowess. Instead, he harks back to the great epic traditions of Greece and Rome.



Paradise Lost, his great poetic retelling of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden is the work for which he is most remembered and revered. We don't have time to look at it here and I would not sully his achievement by trying to deal with it too briefly. I do, however, strongly recommend you try and read it – only if it means dipping into it to sample his language and skill.

I leave you with one thought: throughout the whole poem the most interesting character is Satan, and he has by far the best lines.

